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Pre-modern Dutch identity and the peace celebrations of 1748

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The history of the Dutch Republic is characterised by ongoing conflicts between the Orangists, who supported the stadtholder, and the anti-Orangists – or Staatsgezinden – who opposed the hereditary succession of the stadtholder and, consequently, sought to gain more democratic rights. Several times these conflicts became severe, which led to regime changes. This chapter focuses on the conflict between the Orangists and the Staatsgezinden in 1748. The then recent installation of William IV as the general hereditary stadtholder of the United Provinces had marked the end of the stadtholderless period. William IV was celebrated by many, but despised by others, and his opponents expressed their discontent in satirical writings. It is argued that the nation's history was a key theme in the heated debates: to support their political views, both groups essentially created their own version of the nation's glorious past.

Introduction

In general, we can distinguish two different views on the history of the Dutch Republic in the early modern period. The first group of historians lays emphasis on *consensus* and claims that *consensus* was the driving force behind the Republic's rise in the seventeenth century. They use key words such as concord, harmony, tolerance and even 'polder model' to characterise the liberal climate of the Dutch Republic and argue that these characteristics can explain its economic and artistic greatness in the seventeenth century. Examples of this view include *Bevochten*

Eendracht by Willem Frijhoff and Marijke Spies (1999) and *Nederland en het poldermodel* (2013) by Maarten Prak and Jan Luiten van de Zanden.¹

The second group of historians, on the other hand, points towards *discord*. Marjolein 't Hart, for instance, has argued that international warfare stimulated economic growth in the Republic: 'the organization of their military institutions favoured a high degree of commercialized warfare, stimulated their trade and furthered new capitalist networks. In other words, the Dutch knew how to make money out of organized violence, with continuing profits in the longer term.'² Here war and conflict are presented as the key factors behind the Republic's Golden Age. Discord also features prominently in the work of historians who consider the history of the Dutch Republic as an ongoing struggle between different political and religious factions and who therefore tend to criticise the representation of the nation as harmonious and tolerant. This view is mainly propagated by historians who have focused on years of political outburst and regime change, for example Ari van Deursen's *Bavianen en Slijkgeuzen* and Luc Panhuysen's *Het rampjaar 1672*, and by nearly all historians who concentrate their research on the eighteenth century, a century known for its many revolts.³

Consensus or discord: which one of these seemingly incompatible views is the correct one? This question is impossible to answer because it's all in the eye of the beholder. The Republic's successful struggle for independence automatically leads to the conclusion that some of its success must have been the result of excellent leadership, cooperation and a tolerant climate while, at the same time, religious, moral and political conflicts are just as much part of that same history. In a recent study on religious toleration in the Republic, the literary historian Els Stronks asserts that different denominations and their ideologies coexisted rather peacefully in the Republic while, at the same, the bounds of toleration were constantly under pressure.⁴ This ambiguity stems from the wish to situate the specific characteristics of the Dutch Republic within a European context: the fact that such a small nation could become one of the world's leading powers in such short time calls for an explanation. Depending on the historian's interests, he or she will focus on either continuity or moments of rupture to characterise the nation's unique history.

In the research project 'Proud to Be Dutch: The Role of War and Peace in the Shaping of an Early Modern Dutch Identity (1648–1815)' consensus and discord play equally important roles.⁵ In this project, we aim to investigate developments and changes in the rise of Dutch national thought in the early modern period by focusing on cultural

and literary reflections on war and peace. On the one hand, we examine the characteristics and qualifications that gave the Dutch Republic a clear profile and identity in relation to other nations. One of the sub-projects, for example, investigates the role of peace celebrations and the shaping of national thought.⁶ This research shows that writers went to great lengths to symbolise the unity of the Dutch Republic on the occasion of important peace celebrations. In their writings the outline of a Dutch 'imagined community' based upon shared traditions and values becomes visible – to use Benedict Anderson's well-known concept.⁷ Here concord, harmony and unity are the key words.

On the other hand, the shaping of this common identity was an ongoing process of negotiating differences and excluding competing identities within the Dutch Republic. Political and religious struggles were constantly smouldering beneath the surface: the representation of a Dutch identity, although mainly homogeneous, was permanently under debate and contested. The political differences between Orangists, who supported the stadtholder, and the anti-Orangists – or *Staatsgezinden* – who opposed hereditary succession of the stadtholder and, consequently, sought to gain more democratic rights, are visible throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as are the tensions between different denominations.

This chapter will address the permanent tension between consensus and discord by taking the year 1748 as a case study. In this year the peace treaty of Aachen was signed, ending the War of the Austrian Succession. During this war the Dutch Republic had suffered severe attacks by the French in the southern parts of the country. The Peace of Aachen was therefore welcomed by many Dutch authors, who glorified the role of the Dutch Republic and the nation's heroes in the present and the past. Internally, however, political tensions were present everywhere. In 1747 a new stadtholder had been appointed, William IV. His appointment as the general hereditary stadtholder of the United Provinces marked the end of a stadtholderless period, which had lasted forty-five years. William IV was celebrated by many and seen as the great saviour in times of despair but despised by others, and his opponents expressed their discontent in satirical writings.⁸ This chapter will look at occasional poetry that represents both political sides. The nation's history was a key theme in the heated debates: to support their political views, each group essentially created its own version of the nation's glorious past.⁹ First the dominant discourse of the Orangists will be discussed, before turning to the dissident voices.

Orangist celebrations

The peace treaty of Aachen ended the War of the Austrian Succession, which had swept through Europe for eight years. The war broke out in 1740 after the death of Charles VI, emperor of the Holy Roman Empire. He had tried to secure the rights of his daughter, Maria Theresa, to the Habsburg throne through the Pragmatic Sanction of 1713, but her position was challenged immediately after his death by several princes, including the Spanish king Philip VI, the Prussian king Frederick II and the prince-elector of Bavaria, Charles VII. Initially, the Dutch Republic maintained a neutral course, but things changed when France invaded the Austrian Netherlands in 1744 and rapidly escalated in 1747 when the French besieged several cities in Zeelandic Flanders, including Hulst, Sas van Gent, Axel and Bergen op Zoom.¹⁰

In response to this threat, William IV was appointed by the States-General as the Captain General and Stadtholder of all districts in the Republic. To celebrate this event illuminations and fireworks were organised throughout the Dutch Republic (Figure 1.1).¹¹ The



Fig. 1.1 Fireworks in The Hague to celebrate the Peace of Aachen, 13 June 1749, by Jan Caspar Philips. Courtesy of Rijksmuseum Amsterdam, RP-P-OB-60.037

fighting continued, and in April 1748 the French besieged Maastricht. When peace was finally established – the preliminaries were signed on 30 April and officially acknowledged on 18 October 1748 – France had to abandon these cities again.¹²

The Peace of Aachen was warmly welcomed by the Dutch, who had experienced severe losses in the south. The adherents of William IV extensively praised his achievements as commander-in-chief of the army as if it had been the stadtholder himself who had personally liberated the besieged cities. According to his adherents, there were two more reasons to celebrate 1748 as a special year. Firstly, exactly a hundred years earlier the Treaty of Münster had been signed, which meant that the Dutch Republic was celebrating its first centenary as an independent state. Secondly, in March a new prince had been born, the future William V. This made the position of the new stadtholder, who now also had a male successor, stronger than ever.¹³ All these factors made 1748 a year of ‘miracles’ in Orangist eyes.¹⁴

In the many celebratory writings that were published to commemorate the centenary of the Peace of Münster and the achievement of the Peace of Aachen, the Orangist perspective dominated. At least thirty-five occasional writings were published, including sermons, plays, poems and treatises, and three large anthologies: *Olyf-krans der vrede* (1748, reprint of 1648; Olive Wreath of Peace), *Dichtkunstig gedenkteeken* (1748; Poetical Memorial) and *De tempel der vrede, geopend door de mogendheden van Europa* (1749; The Temple of Peace, Opened by the Powers of Europe).¹⁵ Each of these volumes consisted of approximately forty poems, written by authors from different provinces. These anthologies were presented as a luxurious series, and the second volume was offered personally to William IV in The Hague.¹⁶

All these occasional writings were written from an Orangist perspective. The peace celebrations were filled with praise for the new stadtholder. Many authors stressed that it was the people’s wish (*vox populi*) that William IV had been appointed in that position; William IV, for his part, was said to be a true, loving father of his people. One of the poets even called him ‘the very best Father of the Fatherland’.¹⁷ This kind of imagery was not new but can also be found in earlier representations of the stadtholders, as Jill Stern has shown in her study on Orangism in the Dutch Republic between 1650 and 1672.¹⁸

In the many poems, plays and anthologies written on the occasion of the Peace of Aachen, the markers of a Dutch (Orangist) identity clearly become visible. This identity was held together by the repetition of national symbols, myths and recurring themes. The poets went to great

lengths to celebrate the national past and emphasise the strength and endurance of the Dutch inhabitants across many decades. At the same time, they were oriented towards the future. With the appointment of a new stadtholder a new era had dawned, and, so they argued, a new Golden Age was about to come into existence. In this way, they effectively masked the fact that in reality the Dutch Republic had become a minor power in the field of international relations.

The nation's history was one of the key themes: many poems contained a historical outline of Dutch history with the aim of legitimising the position of the stadtholder. Three recurring themes can be distinguished: (1) revolt and liberation, (2) the idea of having been chosen by God or divine providence, and (3) the return of a Golden Age. To start with revolt and liberation: it was argued that William's recent election was the logical outcome of nearly two hundred years of struggle for freedom and liberty, which had started with the Revolt against the Spaniards and now ended with the defeat of the French. Special landmarks in this history included the Union of Utrecht of 1579, which brought together the seven northern provinces into one political union, and the many victories during the Eighty Years' War against the Spaniards, such as the triumphs in De Briel (1572) and Leiden (1574) at the beginning of the war and the victories in 's-Hertogenbosch (1629) and Hulst (1645) at the end of that conflict. The authors constructed an entirely Orangist view of the nation's history, claiming that all previous victories had been the result of superior leadership by the stadtholders. See, for example, how the poetess Sara Maria van Zon writes about the glorious past:

Wilhelmus of Nassau relives on every tongue
Who is not conscious of Maurits' bravery
And Frederik Hendrik's glory, for better or worse?
No, heroes! No, everyone talks of your brave war acts:
From your laurel wreaths grow olive leaves
The second William saw, when it was God's wish
The States declared free, by the treaty of Münster.¹⁹

The nation's history is summarised in only seven lines, mentioning four different stadtholders in succession. This teleological way of representing the past suggested that the stadtholders (and God's benevolence) were entirely responsible for the Republic's successful struggle for independence.

The sea heroes of the Anglo-Dutch wars were also extensively celebrated as well as the heroic come-back of the stadtholder in 1672, but deep silence shrouded the second stadtholderless period between 1702

and 1747. In the eyes of Orangists, the nation's history was obviously worth remembering only when a stadtholder was in charge of things. They continued their narration with the year 1747, in which William IV was appointed, and praised his excellent leadership in the battles against the French. He was represented as a true hero who had brought new peace and wealth to the country. In the words of the poetess Suzanna Maria Oortman: 'Prince Friso went to the battlefields in order to fight for us, he returned, and brought us peace.'²⁰

The bravery of the Dutch was contrasted with the evil nature of the Spanish during the Eighty Years' War and the French during the many Dutch–French Wars in the period 1672–1713 and the contemporary conflicts. Poets compared the noble nature of the stadtholders with the cruelty of King Philip II of Spain, the Duke of Alva, and his successor Luis de Requesens. They repeatedly mentioned the killing by Alva of '18,000 souls', the horrifying sack of Naarden in 1572 and the 'dreadful screaming of widows and orphans', which could be heard everywhere during the Spanish attacks.²¹ This litany of crooks and misery seamlessly continued in laments about the wicked nature of the French monarchs Louis XIV and XV and the French general Ulrich von Löwenthal, who had been commander-in-chief during the sieges of Bergen op Zoom and Maastricht. A parallel was drawn between the destruction by the French in 1672 of Bodegraven and Zwammerdam and their relentless attacks on the Dutch Republic in 1747. In this way, a rigid black-and-white scheme was constructed, which could lead only to the conclusion that the present victory was the reward for long and continuous fighting against evil.

The second theme, the idea of being the chosen people and beneficiaries of divine providence, was also prevalent. The argument was that God had not only restored peace in Europe but that the Dutch people were the chosen people. This idea was also often propagated by ministers from the Reformed Church, as Cornelis Huisman has shown in his study on national consciousness in Reformed circles in the eighteenth century.²² Parallels with the people of Israel, who were rescued by Moses, were drawn by many poets. They depicted the new stadtholder as the new Moses, who led his people through difficult situations:

O God, who so clearly has saved us from
The hands of the enemies
When You restored Orange
To the benefit of the Netherlands
And chose him as general Pastor
O Lord, please continue to protect our prince.²³

A sense of superiority was expressed by suggesting that the Republic had a privileged position and that God had chosen to protect this people by sending an excellent 'saviour', William IV.

In their representation of the nation's history nearly every highlight was the result of the powerful intervention of a stadtholder, who was supported by God. In this way, it was suggested that an inextricable bond existed between the Republic, God and the stadtholderly family. According to the poet Jacobus van der Streng:

As long as the Orange Tree is in the Netherlands
Our Free Territory honours the God of its Fathers
Then our State has nothing to fear
Because no Tyrant will ever dominate God's estate.²⁴

This 'triple alliance' between God, Orange and the Dutch Republic, which had overcome so many threats in the past and would be able to resist any crisis in the future, would remain one of the most powerful poetical symbols of Dutch identity throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

The third motive was the return of a Golden Age. It was argued that the peace would bring a new era of economic and cultural prosperity; the Republic that had once been one of the most powerful nations in the world would again rise and dictate the 'world's history'. This stereotypical image had been used in Renaissance lyrics, when poets referred to the classical images of the *aetas aurea* by Ovid and Virgil and argued that they lived in a Golden Age themselves.²⁵ The crucial difference, however, was that the return of a Golden Age became part of a political argument, namely that the new stadtholder was to thank for this happy development. The poet Joannes van der Heide argued that international trade would flourish again and that Amsterdam would once more become the economic centre of the world: 'Trade relives, the fundament of this nation, which has lifted it up to such height [...], Amsterdam remains the market square of the world.'²⁶ Other poets emphasised that the arts also would reach new heights as the economic prosperity would automatically give the arts new impulses.

All these themes – Orangism, the chosen people, the superiority of Dutch history and the return of a Golden Age – come together in the following verses by Anna Maria de Jong:

O great Friso! God will support you
In the important governance with His mighty hand
Therefore a new Golden Age will flourish
As when David's son graced Israel's throne.²⁷

Dissident voices

In these writings the markers of a Dutch identity, based upon shared traditions and values, clearly become visible. This identity, however, was challenged by anti-Orangists, who regretted the fact that William IV had been appointed as a general stadtholder of the Dutch Republic. In the course of 1748 many riots and revolts broke out in different parts of the country. The trouble started in Friesland, where rioters plundered the houses of farmers in May 1748, sparking off a series of riots across the Dutch Republic, ranging from the north to the south. The fighting was extremely violent in Amsterdam (Figure 1.2), where the authorities had great difficulty in restoring order as the riflemen refused to protect the farmers' houses. The city magistrate then decided to take severe measures and sentenced some of the rioters to death. Three of them were hung on the Dam Square on 29 June 1748.²⁸

Considering these severe outbursts of violence, it is striking how the Orangist voice dominated the occasional poetry written during these years. Critical comments were spread as well, but they constitute a minority compared with the seemingly endless stream of



Fig. 1.2 Riots on Dam Square in Amsterdam, 1748, by Jan Smit, Courtesy of Rijksmuseum Amsterdam, RP-P-1944-1902

celebratory writings about William IV. Nevertheless, there is a series of volumes in which the anti-Orangist voice can be heard loudly and clearly: *Dichtkundig Praal-Tooneel van Neerlands wonderen* (1748–54, 6 vols.). This anthology includes some verses in favour of the stadtholder and other poetry against his regime and gives a good idea of the heated debates during these years. It is unknown who the editor and publisher of this volume were, and most of the poems were published anonymously. Further research is therefore needed to unravel who might have hidden behind these dissident writings.

Dichtkundig Praal-Tooneel was filled with miscellany: it contained short and long poems, satirical pieces and dialogues between peasants (the so-called ‘praatjespamfletten’). Many poems take the form of a ‘keerdicht’, i.e. a poem that is written in response to another poem and uses the same rhyme. An example of such a ‘keerdicht’ is a riddle about the Dutch Lion. In the Orangist version the lion is represented as a powerful animal with one head and seven tails while the Patriot version ironically speaks of seven heads and one tail.²⁹ Another example is a poem about the Virgin of Holland: in the first version she is lamenting the current situation in which the appointment of a new stadtholder has led to misery all over the country; in the second version she is celebrating the stadtholder, who has protected and liberated the nation.³⁰

The first two volumes mainly address the turbulent years 1747–8.³¹ The criticism of the anti-Orangists was mostly directed against Daniël Raap, the leader of a pro-Orangist revolt in Amsterdam, and at the prince himself, William IV. Furthermore, many local events and riots were described, such as the riots in Leiden, Rotterdam, Amsterdam and Arnhem. By collecting all these verses that addressed different regions in a single volume, it was suggested that the dissatisfaction with the stadtholder was nationwide. The Orangists’ representation of the nation’s present and past was also attacked by the dissident poets. In their view, the appointment of a new stadtholder should be considered as a low point in Dutch history. The Orangist concept of liberty was particularly criticised, for instance in the following verses: ‘One praises Liberty, as if it was born hundred years ago; one could better commemorate its death, because it was lost eternally in this year of peace.’³² Other poets lamented the death of Liberty in graveyard poems. In a satirical tone they wrote about all the medication they had administered in an attempt to save her life, but Liberty was unable to survive in these horrifying circumstances. In one of the poems Liberty chokes because of the smell of Orange balsam.³³

One of the authors directed his criticism expressly at all poets and poetesses who had contributed to the volume *Dichtkunstig gedenkteeken*, in which the Peace of Münster was commemorated. He stated that the 'virtuous' William IV was silencing all his opponents and that his way of achieving unity and concord was rather one-sided.³⁴ Furthermore, an anti-Orangist chronicle of the year 1748 was published, in which all the so-called 'joyful' events, such as the birth of the new prince and the signing of the peace treaty, were ridiculed. It is noteworthy that most criticism was directed at the current political situation and that the dissident poets did not really succeed in creating an alternative version of the nation's past. Only one dissident hero was frequently mentioned, Johan van Oldenbarnevelt. This seventeenth-century statesman who had been beheaded by Prince Maurice represented 'real liberty' in their eyes. Several poems were dedicated to the famous 'walking stick' of van Oldenbarnevelt, which in 1747 was presented to the mayor of The Hague.³⁵ A strong anti-Orangist counter-narrative of the nation's past, however, was absent.

Although *Dichtkundig Praal-Tooneel* contains a considerable amount of anti-Orangist poetry, the question remains why nearly all dissident writings were published anonymously and why the Orangist voice became so dominant in such a short time. What happened to all those writers who had not withheld their critical views during the stadtholderless period that had lasted forty-five years? If one compares the occasional writings published in 1748 with the writings published during earlier peace celebrations such as those in 1648, 1697 (Peace of Rijswijk) and 1713 (Peace of Utrecht), the absence of dissident voices is even more striking.³⁶ It has been suggested by the historian Ton Jongenelen that freedom of the press was restricted severely after the installation of William IV and that the output of publishers can hardly be called representative of the public mood of that period.³⁷ This interesting suggestion, however, still needs further investigation.

Nevertheless, it is striking how easily the former period was forgotten and how quickly the void was filled with celebrations of Orangism. The coherence of the poetic vocabulary was also remarkable: the poets all used the same kinds of metaphors, stereotypes and historical references in their celebratory writings. History was one of the key themes of their concordant writings: they all argued that continuity dominated the nation's history and that this history was held together by a string of stadtholders, starting with William of Orange and leading up to William IV. They were the pillars of the nation's history and lent the writings a logical structure. Other elements, like

the blessings of divine providence and the return of a Golden Age, could also be found in the poetry of the seventeenth century and now circulated in this new political context.

Perhaps there is another reason for the absence of a clear anti-Orangist counter-narrative. There was no way to tell the story of freedom and liberation from foreign oppression without referring to the earlier stadtholders. How, for example, could one tell the story of the Revolt without referring to William of Orange? That was simply impossible. The main strategy of the anti-Orangists was, therefore, to criticise William IV and his adherents, but they were not able to really undermine the canonical view of the nation's past.³⁸

The permanent threat of discord

The dominance of the Orangist voice would not last forever, and if one reads the texts with the knowledge of what happened in the years to come it is striking how many references were made to possible escalation of the internal political conflicts. The Orangist poets wrote about peace and restoration of stability, indeed, but their poems sounded rather warlike and were filled with anxiety. See, for example, the following verse of the Reformed poet Johannes Boskoop:

The Land is in uproar, all fight each other
O horrible sight! The one is murdering the other!
Where will this lead (o grief!), the enemy lurks everywhere,
The land is in uproar!³⁹

Boskoop celebrates the Peace of Aachen and the new stadtholder, but he also expresses his disgust with the present situation, which is characterised by serious conflicts between the Orangists and the Staatsgezinden.

The same fear of discord is expressed in two theatre plays written on the occasion of the Peace of Aachen: *Europa bevredigt* by Johannes Smit (1748) and *Leeuwendaal hersteld door de vrede* (1749) by Lucas Pater.⁴⁰ In both plays the allegorical figures of War and Discord are competing with good characters, such as Peace and Concord. It is remarkable how much attention is given to discord in these plays, although both plays were written to celebrate the newly established peace in Europe. As might be expected, Peace and Concord overcome the evil powers in the end, but it's clear that they must remain permanently on guard against internal as well as external forces.

In the play by Smit, the god of war, Mars, tries to win the sympathy of Discord in order to create chaos in the United Provinces. Mars has set his eye on Maastricht and estimates that his chances are good because the Republic is exhausted after all the heavy fighting. Discord, however, is frustrated by Concord, who is gaining influence on the European as well as the national level. All European princes are tired of fighting and long for peace. Under the direction of Peace the European princes manage to reach an agreement and make Mars and Discord bow to their needs. A song by the Dutch people ('Rei van Nederlanders') concludes the play by lamenting about the many losses but cheering the moment that William IV came into power and peace was restored.

In the play by Pater, Mars and Discord oppose Peace, Liberty, Loyalty, Alertness and Concord. The focus of his play, however, is not directed at restoring peace at the European level but at the welfare of the Republic. One of the greatest threats is, undoubtedly, internal dispute, which has manifested itself frequently in Dutch history. Concord utters strong warnings against the destructive influence of discord: 'Due to Discord your State has fallen from time to time / By me alone a nation can exist'.⁴¹ His greatest supporter is Generosity, in whose character William IV can easily be recognised. Generosity is wearing orange veils and operates like a true saviour. He accepts the supreme command of his fatherland and is prepared to sacrifice his life for it. He manages to capture his enemies, and in the end peace is established.

The title of Pater's play, *Leeuwendalers*, was a clear reference to the play that the well-known poet Joost van den Vondel had dedicated a hundred years earlier to the Peace of Münster. In Vondel's play reconciliation is the main theme as well, although literary historians still disagree about the political and religious messages Vondel hid in his allegory. However, it is undisputed that stadtholder Willem Frederik (1584–1647) was extensively praised by Vondel for his contribution in the peace negotiations.⁴² In the case of Pater, there's no doubt that his sympathies lay with William IV and that his concept of unity and harmony is exclusively defined from an Orangist perspective. His play was met with fierce criticism by anti-Orangists as is illustrated by this cynical comment of an anonymous poet: '[In this play] one hears Friso's [i.e. William IV's] name being recommended as high as the stars/it is, however, difficult to prove that he deserves such praise'.⁴³ Concord as it was propagated by Pater – namely from an exclusively Orangist perspective – only led to new political tensions and discord.

Cycles of war and peace

Let me conclude with an observation made by Elaine Scarry, professor of English and American literature. She states that every peace contains the opportunity for future wars: 'it has been argued that peace treaties, far from minimizing the possibility of war, instead specify the next occasion of war; they in effect become predictive models or architectural maps of the next war'.⁴⁴ This statement holds true for the peace texts of 1748: the fear of new internal political struggles is omnipresent, and, indeed, in the years to come, the internal political struggles would reach new heights. In 1780 the Patriot Revolt broke out, which led to a full-scale civil war between the Orangists and Patriots. These turbulent years constitute another episode in the history of the Dutch Republic in which discord prevailed in spite of the attempt of Orangist poets to create a unifying image of the Dutch Republic in the 'miraculous year' of 1748.